DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 271 FL 008 575

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TITLE Teaching Pupils How to Acquire Language: Some Comments on the Positions Implicit in the Preceding Two Articles. ELT Documents (76/3).
INSTITUTION British Council, London (England). English-Teaching Information Centre.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 7p.; For related documents, see FL 008 480-481

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); Language Fluency; *Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Student Participation; *Student Role; Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This article considers some of the implications of the position developed by Allwright and Long in their respective papers, both of which are found in this issue of "ELT Documents." Basically the position is that methodological emphasis should be placed on the second language learner rather than on the teacher. Teachers faced with large, not particularly motivated beginner classes, and lacking in expensive equipment, might question this position. A solution might be to discuss the nature of teacher intervention rather than its extent. The search for "real" language in the second language classroom is misplaced, but the teacher must ensure that practice in fluency is emphasized as much as accuracy. For this to take place, a considerable part of the responsibility for the content of language work must be placed on the pupil. This way the kind of work outlined by Allwright and Long will be possible at intermediate and advanced stages without a major break in learning style. This presupposes a number of techniques for use in the classroom which are not currently accepted. These include: (1) giving pupils the opportunity to make mistakes, (2) use of the mother tongue or a mixture of the mother tongue and the second language in the early stages, (3) giving pupils a moment to think about responses before giving them, and (4) practice of pupils' utterances in pairs where possible. (AM)

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TEACHING PUPILS HOW TO ACQUIRE LANGUAGE: SOME COMMENTS ON THE POSITIONS IMPLICIT IN THE PRECEDING TWO ARTICLES - C J Brumfit

I WOULD like to start by making it clear that I consider the discussion area demarcated in the two papers presented in this issue of ELT Documents to be one of fundamental importance to language teaching, so fundamental that it is extraordinary that it has been so little explored. The purpose of this article is to look at the same area, but from a slightly different perspective from that taken by Richard Allwright and Michael Long. The main purpose of the former paper, I take it, is to raise the issue of non-intervention by the teacher as a linguistic authority and to describe one effective attempt to run an advanced course without this kind of teacher domination. The latter paper is concerned to develop a more theoretical perspective and to point the way for future research. Both papers place the methodological emphasis firmly on the learner and his strategies and needs, and both implicitly criticise previous over-emphasis on the role of the teacher. In the comments which follow, I hope to

consider some of the implications of the position developed by the two previous writers for what might be described as 'normal beginners' teaching'. By 'normal' I mean the situation in which classes are large (30+), pupils not exceptionally highly motivated, expensive equipment not readily available and teachers only rarely able to discuss their ideas and innovations with more than the occasional colleague. I want to relate this discussion to the teaching of beginners because, in the nature of language teaching, there are more beginners than finishers, and - more seriously - because there is a danger that the teacher who reads this issue may well feel inclined to retort, 'Ah yes, all this non-intervention is fine, providing the students have already been through a thoroughly drilled and explicitly organised teaching system; of course they can benefit from opportunities for practice, providing someone has given them some language to practice with'. I am not, as will emerge, totally unsympathetic to this retort, but I do think that it would be most unfortunate if the impact of these two articles was limited by such a reaction. Finally, I am interested in teaching because there is a risk of too neat a glib distinction becoming fashionable. Teachers have always been concerned with facilitating learning, sometimes with more intervention, sometimes less. No doubt the current paradigm over-emphasises the degree of intervention necessary for the teacher, but there is a great danger in over-reacting (I am not suggesting that either Allwright or Long do so, but it seems important to point out the risk before the persuasiveness of their position tempts us all to). The teacher should not control his class in the sense of pre-arranging everything that is uttered, but he should control it to the extent of knowing - as far as the current state of knowledge allows him to - why he has organised it in the way he has, and by permitting freedom only within the framework of what is known of the language-learning process. For example, group discussion can be very free or it can be very restricted; in both cases it can be very valuable - but it is not valuable because it is group activity, it is valuable because of the changes which it contributes to producing in the learner, and if the teacher has no idea what sort of changes he is hoping to produce (ie no analytical framework of language functions or language forms related to the learner's needs), he has no way of distinguishing learning activity from non-learning activity (or activity which contributes to learning other, irrelevant or even harmful things) and no way of talking to fellow-workers about what he is doing and thus of improving and learning himself. Ultimately, the classroom can only be a 'free' class within a definition which the teacher understands of what the purpose is of that freedom. The function of research and discussion is to make that definition as explicit as possible so that the teacher can operate in the light of the best available understanding - but it is the teacher who operates; he cannot avoid being central and however freely the pupil may appear to be operating, it will always be within a tacit framework of what the teacher has allowed. For this reason, it seems more sensible to concentrate not on the extent of teacher intervention but on the nature of teacher intervention. Teacher intervention cannot be withdrawn, but it can be modified, and its characteristics can be described with greater or less explicitness.

It would seem, then, that the discussion of language teaching may be best couched in the form: 'Given the learner is like this, the teacher should organise things like this'. As we are increasingly able to understand new aspects of the language-learning process, so our understanding of the role of the teacher will change. However, as our discussion focuses more and more on the learner, there is a danger that a number of distinctions which are frequently made will tend to be confused with each other, and I would like, briefly, to try to keep them apart.

1. Arbitrary language use versus 'real' language use: except for the language of class organisation and control, language used in the classroom will always be arbitrary, selective and unspontaneous, simply because classrooms are places organised for ends beyond themselves. Nonetheless,

it is possible to minimise the arbitrariness by means of (eg) simulation exercises, discussion, overt teaching of other subjects, etc. The question here for the teacher is: How close can my teaching take pupils to their anticipated language needs in the outside world?

2. Language use versus language practice: there are many ways of using language in the classroom, but it has to be remembered that while all language use is language practice, not all language practice is language use. In fact, this distinction is really a version of the accuracy-fluency division, for language practice is all too often only concerned with the accuracy of phonological or syntactic patterns. The question for the teacher is: How much opportunity am I giving members of my class to talk as individuals to each other, using as much English as they can, to say things which they have decided to say and which are as far as possible in response to what has been said before - practice for fluency rather than accuracy?

3. Teacher-selected versus pupil-selected items: there will clearly be a strong tendency for the teacher to select many practice items, but even here it is possible for some degree of pupil freedom to be encouraged, particularly in choice of content words at the early stages. Question: How many times have members of my class determined the wording in practice items?

To summarise the position so far, then. It is suggested that the teacher cannot avoid taking responsibility for the extent and nature of the language work going on in classes under his guidance. The search for 'real' language is misplaced, as scarcely any classroom language is 'real', because classrooms are concerned with equipping people for the world outside: there must always be a willing suspension of disbelief. However, the teacher does need to ensure that practice in fluency (rapid, natural production and reception of contextualised, meaningful language) is provided as much as practice in accuracy. For this to take place, a considerable part of the responsibility for the content of language work must be placed on the pupil, and this responsibility should be given even from the very earliest stages. If this position is accepted as valid for the language-learning situation right from the very beginning, then the kind of work outlined by Allwright and Long will be possible at intermediate and advanced stages without a major break in language-learning style being necessary. It does, however, presuppose a number of techniques for use in the classroom which are not currently accepted in many places at the moment. Some of the most important implications are considered below.

1. Pupils should be given plenty of opportunity to make mistakes. If there is going to be genuinely fluent practice, many mistakes of phonology, syntax and semantics will be made. To demand simultaneous accuracy and fluent production is to demand the impossible for many students. For this reason teachers need to become aware of the relative significance of various kinds of error. Errors will show the teacher the kinds of problem the learner is facing and overcoming, but it must be recognised that some problems are more serious than others. For example, we accept a great deal of variety in pronunciation in native speech and are more tolerant of pronunciation variation from foreign speakers than we are of syntactic variation,though even here we accept variation far more readily in speech than in writing. Bearing in mind the purpose of the utterance, and whether it is spoken or written, the teacher should be prepared - at certain times - to tolerate a wide range of possible mistakes of accuracy in the interests of developing fluent production and comprehension.

2. In the early stages of language learning it may be better to have talk going on in the mother tongue, or in a mixture of mother tongue and

English, than to have no fluent talk going on at all. This is not always possible when there are mixed language groups, but - when fluency is the aim of the exercise - any way of promoting frequent and rapid exchange should be encouraged.

3. Pupils should sometimes be given a moment to think about what they are going to say, so that they can contribute meaningfully to the activity. Even at a very early stage, most patterns can be extended by pupils themselves so that they are making true statements about themselves:

Tomorrow I'm going to...
or Every day I ...

Even filling in slots like this will require a little thought, and specific time (a minute or two) should be given for people to do their thinking.

4. Pupils' utterances in class should be practised in pairs wherever possible, with all the pairs in the class talking simultaneously. This means that the pupil-improvised utterance should be followed by some more or less appropriate response. To use the example given in 3 above:

P1: Tomorrow I'm going to...

P2: {Oh, aren't you lucky.} depending on the place being visited.
{Oh, bad luck. }

Responses of this kind are not difficult to set up and, although strongly controlled, they do give an early chance for pupils to produce language which is a. true, b. their own in part, and c. capable of producing a response dependent on the meaning of what they have said.

Pair-work of this kind might only take 20 seconds before the teacher moves on. With larger material for improvisation and more complex exercises, group or pair discussion - relatively uncontrolled - may go on for an hour or more and be very fruitful. But it should be remembered that the teacher is usually tempted, especially at the beginning, to let it go on for too long. It must not reach the point of being unproductive - but we also need to be much clearer than we have been in the past about what constitutes productive language work.

If procedures such as these are followed right from the earliest days of English teaching, pupils will soon develop an awareness that they need to participate both in the formulation and the production of language items themselves. As time goes on, they will be able, under the guidance of the teacher, to work increasingly freely and with increased fluency. But this will only happen if the teacher makes specific provision, right from the start, for some type of fluency practice with short units of the kind described above rapidly increasing to larger periods of time, with or without the help of the mother tongue. Eventually such procedures would lead on to the much freer work outlined in the other two papers in this issue.

I want to conclude these comments by making two important points. The first is that it may be objected that teacher control has scarcely been lifted at all in the procedures described above. Certainly this paper has concentrated on discussing means of developing some fluency in the early stages, but I would be prepared to argue that the teacher's presence is just as strongly felt, even if invisibly, in the organisation and conception of the more advanced procedures described elsewhere in this issue, as in the situation I have described above. With most learners, however, there is need for teacher support to be overt at the early stages. (It is interesting to note that deliberate attempts, such as the Silent Way, and Counselling Learning, to eliminate traditional aspects

of the teacher's role, also bolster him up with an elaborate paraphernalia of rules and tricks which the learner has to spend the initial stages in penetrating the mysteries of: the teacher is the one who knows why all the weird procedures are being insisted on.) The second point is that, while the foreign teacher of EFL can fairly easily go to a book to check his understanding of grammatical or phonological correctness, it is much harder (even with Leech and Svartvik, 1975) for him to be sure of the appropriacy in communicative terms of the utterances being produced in the course of fluency activity. This difficulty should not prevent teachers from carrying out the necessary work in this area, but the productive work does need to be supplemented by exposure to aural and written materials in which the discourse is fluent and appropriate for situations in which pupils are likely to need English.

REFERENCE

Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik: A Communicative Grammar of English. Longman 1975.